

Great lake view. Shame about the turbines



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As a sailor would call it a squall, an engineer would call it noise. The only way to make sense of the sudden fury that has greeted a modest plan to consider a wind farm on Lake Ontario is to tune it out.

Turn your back on the clamour and get perspective, such as that afforded when standing on the lip of the Scarborough Bluffs, looking south, on a windy day. The view is so huge and pure - nothing but sea, clouds and the infinite curve of Mother Earth. Could any honest person imagine it improved by an irregular smattering of offshore turbines?

The only question is the value we place on that view. It is a matter of aesthetics and nothing else, made especially difficult by the absence of the indicators most often used to judge such matters. There is no way to price the view, no property values will tumble if it is spoiled, no tourists will fail to visit. The scare is that Toronto Hydro has applied to locate a wind-measuring device in the waters right off the bluffs. Nobody will be able to see the device without binoculars, but they can all see what's coming. A public meeting scheduled for last week had to be cancelled when 500 people showed up at a church hall capable of holding 200. A new one is being scheduled for later this month.

Apart from the question of the view, almost every other objection to the potential installation is noise - especially the Internet-generated storm of factoids instant experts have harnessed in an attempt to discredit wind power.

Beneath the noise are certain facts, beginning in the bathymetry of eastern Lake Ontario, which includes a shelf of shallow water stretching from Pickering west to the Leslie Street Spit and extending about four kilometres offshore.

"That 25-kilometre swath of lakebed has the potential for up to 200 megawatts worth of wind power," said Joyce McLean, the Toronto Hydro executive in charge of the utility's renewable energy initiatives. "We can't find anything equivalent to that on land, either within the city or even probably the GTA."

Height restrictions surrounding the island airport - itself a tantalizing wind-farm site - rule out other close-in options. And the underwater cliff that makes deep-lake water cooling possible forbids turbines in the water off the islands.

There is at least one more informative view at hand.

It's what you see when you look south from Commissioners Street in the formerly industrial port lands, across a hard-sided ship basin. The monumental, red-brick hulk of the coal-burning R.C. Hearn Generating Station dominates visually and symbolically, a towering remnant of a dirty age. But the centre of interest is next door - the new, utilitarian metal box known as the Portlands Energy Centre.

The thing to realize is that this four-storey eyesore cost \$730-million to build - \$730-million! - and hardly ever operates. When it does, it sucks in untold millions' worth of Alberta gas and blows out megatonnes of carbon dioxide. Such is the state of the art in Toronto.

Not all local residents are opposed to the wind farm project, according to Lori Metcalfe, president of the Guildwood Village Community Association. "We're not all anti - oh, no," she said, adding that the association has yet to take a position on the matter. "None of us want to be anti-alternative energy. I mean, how could you be?"

If the magnificent view from the top of the iconic bluffs does have value in its unspoiled state, why can't the turbines move out of town? "There must be somewhere on the lakebed where they can build windmills that won't be intrusive on communities," Scarborough Councillor Paul Ainslie said.

"But I guess it's Toronto Hydro, so it's got to be a Toronto showcase."

Ms. McLean agreed, in so many words. "We think it's important to do this close to the demand, where the electricity is needed," she said.

That's the same argument the provincial government used, effectively, when it forced the Portlands Energy Centre on an unwilling host.

There is little reason to expect the same thinking will fail when the time comes to build a large-scale wind farm on the lake.

Aesthetics over infrastructure is always a lousy bet.